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Karen AP7

(1)

THE KARENS OF BURMA

I

BACKGROUND

101 175 THE Karen people of Burma are now the second most important tribe in the country; but one hundred years ago they were called by their more powerful Burman neighbours the "Wild Cattle of the Hills".

At that time they were unorganized and lived in the dense forests that covered the country, especially in the ranges of hills that afforded them protection. They had no written language and were held in bondage to the fears that made their lives stagnant and prevented their changing the customs that they had received from their ancestors.

181 131 361 563 186 They were not an aggressive people and sought security in withdrawal from the rivers, which in those days were the only lines of communication, and they built their small villages high up in the hills or other places difficult of access. Here they lived in poverty but not without hope that some day their descendants would have better times. But now like hunted birds they admonished their children as they squatted at their rude low tables to eat their rice, "Eat fast, eat fast. The Burmans may come!"

173 171 Their origin is obscure. They have no written records and the destructive wet climate has obliterated almost all

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X

ATTITUDE TO THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT

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Whenever the Karens have had an opportunity they have shown their loyalty to the British Government. They have a deep sense of gratitude for the security that has come with a settled and orderly government. This has allowed them to emerge from their hilly recesses, clear tracts of land on the more fertile plains, and build villages of more permanent construction than the flimsy bamboo structures that they built in the mountains when they had to move every two years. Here they could raise buffaloes and cattle and have reasonable protection against forays and marauders. Open exploitation by the Burmese was curbed if not entirely stopped.

During the first Burmese War in 1826 they served as guides for the English expedition against Ava and were commended for their good faith by Major Snodgrass in his "Narrative of the Burmese War". After the war they turned to the American missionaries for education, but they were forbidden to have any contact with the foreigners because the Burmese king and his Government feared the influence of intruders. They were prohibited from visiting their teachers even as late as 1851, when the Burmese Viceroy in Rangoon threatened to shoot instantly the first Karen he should find capable of reading.

In the Second Burmese War in 1852 they led the attacking forces of the British through jungle paths up to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, which was then the strongest military citadel near Rangoon, to attack it successfully from the rear.

The Burmese knew the desire of the Karens for

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freedom which would come from a change in Government, and they inflicted cruel vengeance upon them, burning their villages within a fifty mile radius of Rangoon, and putting men, women and children to death in barbarous ways. This caused large migrations from the territory under the Burmese king to Tenasserim and Arakan which were under British rule. Even here there were frequent miscarriages of justice, for they had to contend against subordinate Burmese officers who still tried to prevent them from gaining more prestige.

After the Third Burmese War in 1885 Karen levies were raised to assist the British. They did excellent work in the pacification of the country where former Burmese soldiers roamed and robbed at will. For assistance in putting down this terror the Karens received scant reward. In fact, many Karens, who with Government permission and their own money had purchased guns for the defence of the country, had them forcibly confiscated because of the unfounded suspicion of their scheming neighbours who resented their rising recognition.

During World War I many Karens were enrolled in the armed services and proved themselves capable and loyal wherever they were called to serve, whether in Mesopotamia, Egypt, or for guard duty in India and the Malay States.

During the Burmese Rebellion under "Saya San" in 1930, in the Tharrawaddy District, the Karens made valuable contributions to the putting down of the insurrection and many of them received honours for their good work at the Durbar in Rangoon. When Karens can serve under officers of their own people they are most happy. They have confidence in British officers but

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often find it difficult to serve under Burman or Indian officers.

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During the rise of the nationalistic movements in Burma, the Karens naturally looked forward to being ruled by their old adversaries without much enthusiasm. They entered into the new government however and played their part as well as could be expected considering their limited opportunity ; by so doing they won the respect of their neighbours to a certain degree and made a contribution to the new regime. In the Cabinets formed under the constitution in force since 1935 there was usually a Karen member who held a portfolio.

As a rule the Karens have exhibited true loyalty to the British Government, but that does not preclude the presence of a few ambitious men who for personal gain have taken the part of Quislings in the present war. Although they happened to be in rather important positions they had only a small following, mostly of ignorant and self-seeking people, and were entirely in opposition to the general attitude of the Karens throughout the country.

In World War II the work of the Karens has been most evident. They occupy important positions in the army and in other services and have done excellent work. If we can believe rumours that have come from Burma, they are undergoing a great deal of suffering not only from the Japanese but from the large number of 'bad hats' who even in peaceful times are always ready to seize an opportunity of easy loot.

The position of minorities has always been difficult. The lot of the Karens has not been harder than that of many other small groups who have had different charac-

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teristics and lived under more powerful neighbouring tribes or peoples whether in Europe, Asia, Africa, or even America. It is hoped that better relations may grow out of the common suffering of this present conflict. This applies to the attitude of the minority as well as to that of the majority.

Pipe

XI

PROGRESS

Very few races or tribes of people have made greater progress in a century and a quarter than have the Karens in Burma. When we think of their wild state, their unhealthy ways, their lack of knowledge, their fear of strangers and their hesitancy in changing their old accepted ways, their primitive agriculture and crude villages, we can hardly realize that some of the refined, educated, well-dressed and cultured people that we have known come from such unlikely ancestry. The "wild cattle of the hills" have indeed turned out to be what they called themselves, *Pga K' Nyaw*, which actually means "men".

One of the greatest contributing factors in helping them to throw off their fears and rid themselves of the fetters of stagnating customs was their accepting the releasing power of the Christian religion. This opened their

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CHAPTER XIV

SOCIAL CONDITIONS

Political Arrangements

The Karen race does not possess what may be termed social solidarity. It is broken up into many tribes, some of which differ considerably from others, as, for instance, the Brecs of Karenni and the Sgaw Karen of Lower Burma. There is, however, enough similarity of dialects and traditions, as well as of religion and customs, to make it certain that they really belong together and are descended from a common ancestry. Even the individual tribes do not consist of compact groups of clans. To be sure, there is more cohesion among the members of one tribe than among those of different tribes; but the village rather than the tribe has the greater claim upon their adherence. In the days before the British conquest and annexation of Burma [1]—when the country received a stable government that put an end to feuds and petty warfare—the village was the political unit. In the village the houses were ranged side by side, or else, as in the Pegu Hills, all the families of the little community lived within what may be called the village-house, each family having its living-room opening off of the common corridor. Everybody was thrown into intimate contact with everybody else in the village. Politically and socially the village was the center of their common life. The family group, the natural unit of kinship, although not always confined to the village, was economically and politically subordinate to it.

In the village the elders ("phga tha phga," literally, the old men) were looked up to as connecting the village life with the past,

[1] The British conquest of Burma was accomplished in three wars, each of which was brought on by the arrogance and stupidity of the Burmese kings and their high-handed dealings with British subjects. The First Burmese War (1824-26) resulted in the ceding of the provinces of Tenasserim and Arakan to the British, in the former of which there was a considerable Karen population. The Second Burmese War (1852-53) ended with the annexation of the country of Pegu or Lower Burma, in which dwell the great body of the Karen people in Burma; and the remainder of the territory ruled by the despotic Burmese kings came to enjoy the privileges of the Indian Empire after a single short campaign of only two months' duration in 1886, known as the Third Burmese War. Soon after this an orderly government was established throughout what is now known as the province of Burma: Sir J. G. Scott, *Burma, A Handbook*, 199-206.